

SZE TSUNG LEONG: HISTORY IMAGES

JUNE 10 – JULY 31, 2004

STOREFRONT FOR ART AND ARCHITECTURE

Artist Sze Tsung Leong's work examines the spatial consequences of rapid urban development in China. The photographs in *History Images* reveal the seemingly instantaneous disappearance and appearance of huge swaths of urban fabric, or in some cases, entire cities. Leong records precise moments in the history of these places, such as the Xuanwu District of Beijing, where Ming and Qing Dynasty courtyard houses, partially destroyed, wait to be demolished to make way for luxury housing; or a field of rubble that is now Old Fengdu, a city razed to make way for the Three Gorges Dam. Leong captures the physical implications of this development process—landscapes imprinted with both irrevocable loss and anticipation of the future.

The scale of urban development currently underway in China is by far the greatest in the world, and yet these photographs are not only about China. As Leong says, "They are about urban erasure, historical absence, and new development of which China may currently have some of the clearest and perhaps most extreme manifestations." Though the physical outcome of these development projects may be familiar, it remains to be seen how the widespread loss of cultural heritage in built form will effect the future of these cities, and others like them all over the world.

History Images features a series of eight large-scale color photographs, all taken from similar vantage points, looking out over expansive sites in cities throughout China—each one in a state of radical transformation.

Opening Reception

Saturday, June 12, 2004

7-9 pm

Sze Tsung Leong is an artist based in New York and Beijing. He was born in Mexico City in 1970.

Photographs by Sze Tsung Leong will also be included in the exhibition **Between Past and Future: New Photography and Video From China**, curated by Christopher Phillips and Wu Hung, at the **International Center of Photography**, New York, June 11 – September 5, 2004.
www.icp.org.

Overleaf: *Old Fengdu, Chongqing Municipality*, 2002, C-print, 40 x 50 in.

Storefront for Art and Architecture

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Founded in 1982, **Storefront for Art and Architecture** is a nonprofit organization committed to the advancement of innovative positions in architecture, art and design.

Directions

Storefront is located at 97 Kenmare St between Mulberry St and Cleveland Place, near Lafayette St. (Subway: 6 to Spring St, or N/R to Prince St)

Gallery Hours

Tuesday – Saturday, 11am – 6pm

ARTIST STATEMENT

The photographs in *History Images* are of histories, in the form of cities in China, either being destroyed or created at this juncture in time. They are of past histories, in the form of traditional buildings and neighborhoods, urban fabrics, and natural landscapes, in the process of being erased. They are of the absence of histories, in the form of construction sites, built upon an erasure of the past so complete that one would never know a past had ever existed. And they are of the anticipation of future histories, yet to unfold, in the form of newly built cities.

Cities are the largest, most enduring, and most encompassing documents of history, uniquely recording the variations and residues of time. Substantial urban change is generally expected to span over prolonged periods: decades, generations, centuries. The evidence of these changes is usually gradual and cumulative; residues of history are slowly left in built form, giving physical shape to the accretions of time. There are moments in history, however, that accelerate the rate of urban change: warfare, changes of regime, transformations of social structure, economic prosperity. These moments force societies to evaluate their relationship to their own history and their attitude to their future, in turn affecting their relationship to their environments. China presently finds itself in one of these moments, as its recent transformations in politics, society, and economics have triggered changes to its cities to a degree not previously seen in its contemporary history.

As much as China's cities are presently changing, so has China's relationship with history. In Imperial China, history was a stable, unchanging reality that gave order and uniformity to society and, in turn, to its urban spaces. After

the Communist Revolution, history was seen as an enemy in need of dismantling, as summarized in the popular Cultural Revolution slogan, "Smash the Old World, Build the New World". Presently in China, history as urban form is seen in contradictory terms: as proof of China's accomplishments and contributions to civilization, yet more often as an inconvenience to urban modernization. Ironically, China's current economic revolution is facilitating the physical destruction of history that was called for during the Cultural Revolution. From the resulting emptiness the components of China's new cities are built out of nothing: luxury apartments, shopping centers, supermarkets, widened roads, tennis courts, office blocks, parking lots.

These photographs are of histories recorded in urban form, all simultaneously occurring, all in the midst of change. They are records of cities in time, in the process of perishing, disappearing, or starting anew: a Ming and Qing Dynasty neighborhood of traditional courtyard houses in Beijing being demolished to make way for luxury housing; a city razed as a result of the construction of the Three Gorges Dam, now the largest dam in the world; a new city built to accommodate the relocation of populations whose former cities will be flooded by the Yangtze River; a traditional district in Chongqing waiting to be destroyed, surrounded by new construction; anonymous construction sites marking the empty moment between the erasure of the past and the arrival of the future. These photographs are of cities caught in the tenuous period after the end of one history and at the beginning of another history.

— Sze Tsung Leong, April 2004

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